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N.S.C. Activism: A Fundamental Shift

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 10 — Members of Congress, foreign policy experts and Administration officials say the involvement of the National Security Council staff in paramilitary operations represents a fundamental shift in its traditional role.

The officials and experts said that for the first time, the President's closest foreign policy advisers were directly involving themselves in sensitive, potentially embarrassing operations such as the recently disclosed shipment of arms to Iran.

They also point to the involvement of President Reagan's N.S.C. staff in assisting the Nicaraguan rebels after Congress cut off aid as evidence that this small, secretive group is taking on new, potentially troubling functions.

"What they have done goes far beyond what anyone else has done with the N.S.C.," said David Aaron, the deputy national security adviser to President Carter.

'A Little Oasis'

"Using the N.S.C. in this kind of operational way is extremely dangerous," he said. "The National Security Council is the one place in Government that is really beyond the purview of the Congress. The national security adviser and his staff are not subject to Senate confirmation. This is a little oasis, and if the President abuses it, he'll lose it."

Members of Congress first began questioning the Reagan Administration's use of the National Security Council staff more than a year ago, when it was disclosed that one of its members was involved in advising the Nicaraguan rebels, or contras. At the time, Congress had cut off aid to the contras.

The White House denied violating that ban, and the various Congressional inquiries into the issue never made much progress in specifying what connection the staff member, Lieut. Col. Oliver North, had with the contras.

That issue arose anew last month when a supply plane, part of a private network developed to deliver arms to the contras, was shot down over Nicaragua.

North's Pervasive Role

As more details emerged, it became clear that the supply operation included a number of expensive airplanes, well-paid crews, and many tons of arms. Several Administration officials acknowledged that this private network came together with the general knowledge and assistance of Colonel North.

Among the evidence linking Colonel North to the contras were phone records that showed calls from safe houses in San Salvador used by the supply planes' crews to the office phone number of Colonel North at the White House.

The White House vigorously disputes accusations that Colonel North's contacts with the contras violated the law. But no Administration official has been willing to discuss the content of these conversations, and it is generally agreed that Colonel North has maintained a relationship with the contras.

Additionally, in the years before the Congressional cutoff, Colonel North played a significant role in planning such controversial operations as the C.I.A.-backed mining of Nicaraguan's harbors.

Colonel North also has been linked to the negotiations with Iran.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's national security adviser, noted that there are many precedents for a President relying on the N.S.C. staffs for sensitive diplomacy.

The United States' opening to China, for example, involved highly secret talks conducted by Henry Kissinger, President Nixon's national security adviser. The Carter White House was also involved in secret contacts with the Iranians in an effort to gain the release of American hostages seized at the United States Embassy in Teheran.

The National Security Council has six members: President Reagan; Vice President Bush; Secretary of State George P. Shultz; Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger; the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. William J. Crowe, and the Director of Central Intelligence, William J. Casey.

These officials are in turn served by a staff of several dozen, directed by the national security adviser, Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter.

Iran 'Not a Rogue Operation'

According to Administration officials, the decision to ship arms to Iran went forward despite the reservations of Mr. Shultz and Mr. Weinberger. Later, Mr. Shultz was said to have protested and succeeded in cutting off the operation temporarily earlier this year.

Some time later, the shipments resumed. It could not be learned how much Mr. Shultz knew about the renewed flow of arms.

Throughout the 18-month period of dispute over the Iran operation, members of the National Security Council were continuing to make contacts with Iran and supervising secret arms shipments. Officials said this was approved by the President.

"This was not a rogue operation by

Ollie North and Admiral Poindexter," one knowledgeable source said. "It is inconceivable that something of such magnitude could have gone forward without knowledge of the Cabinet members who sit on the National Security Council."

Management Deficiencies Seen

The primary role of the N.S.C. staff has historically been the coordination of the activities of the various parts of the foreign policy bureaucracy, ranging from the State Department to the policy advisers in the Pentagon.

Critics of President Reagan's N.S.C. have complained that it is weak in coordinating policy, and that interdepartmental disputes over such issues as arms control have raged for years without resolution.

One Republican Congressional aide, a longtime observer of the Reagan N.S.C. said the Iran case appears to be an attempt to short-cut what is normally a slow-moving, overly deliberative process. Seeking decisive action, the N.S.C. took over, cutting out most of the State Department, C.I.A., and Defense Department from knowledge of the operation.

"If you think the President's authority gives you a mandate to take over a large operation, you get into difficulties because you don't have behind you the dampening effect of the bureaucracy," the aide said. "The bureaucracy is ponderous, but it gives people a chance to assess risks, ponder the down side, and get balanced advice."